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Shortgrass Country

By Monte Noelke

Spring rains have been spotted in our neighborhood. The showers have been following fencelines and stalling on far horizons. Scant tenths of an inch have become too common a call.

We stopped feeding in mid-April to shear and mark lambs. Enough green sprigs and old grass was around to justify the decision. But from the looks of the long hair on a few pastures of the calves, we might have parked the feed wagon too quick.

Last week I made a test run to see how the tail-enders would respond to a handout of the calves half-heartedly fumbled the cubes around in the dry grass. Old sisters actually swallowing the feed were easy to spot. Each time they'd sling their heads to spook off the horn flies, they'd slosh splotches of cottonseed meal on their black hides. The minute the wet meal landed, horn flies swarmed to eat it. The leftover feed was a 32 percent protein recipe. Shortgrass horn flies are blood suckers; nevertheless, the distinguishing characteristic of a blood sample from one of our range cows is the heavy flavor of cottonseed meal.

On that hot a ration, the flies responded instantaneously. Five minutes later, or maybe even less

time, they were doing trick landings and barely taking off in time to avoid the switch of the cows' tails.

Observing the flies' behavior makes it harder to decide whether to go back to feeding. Feed prices are softer, but I don't want to feed up a strain of flies that'll take over my outfit.

The best bet may be to buy a hard protein block that will control consumption. With all this dry weather, there's not much left over to solve a horn fly problem.